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## The Long Voyage Home—Begun<sup>1</sup>

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*Editor's Note: This is the first part of a two-part article dealing with the academic job market.*

As the Czech novelist Milan Kundera has aptly noted, we rarely know exactly what it is we want or if we are making the right decision at any given point in our lives.<sup>2</sup> Many really important acts in our lives we perform but once; we are destined thus to make mistakes that cannot be corrected later. Applying for one's first permanent full-time academic position following completion of the Ph.D. is terribly important and has great potential for error. Most of us aren't exactly sure what we want in a position or an institution beyond "something good," and the experience is not repeated. It is not such a bad thing to get it as close to right as possible the first time.

My own experience, casual observation of graduate colleagues, and conversations with recently appointed assistant professors suggest that a substantial mythology surrounds the beliefs held by graduate students about the process. Sources of these beliefs are several: the inevitable naivete and optimism of youth; the fact that many tenured faculty now in their forties, because of boom conditions obtaining in academia when they completed their doctorates, never experienced the recruitment process as it works today and do not necessarily give sound advice to their students; and the traditional facade with

which academia papers over the practical details of making a living—political scientists just do not seem to devote the same systematic attention to practical professional development as they do to research.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, political scientists (somewhat ironically, I think) seem to have a considerable investment in down playing the role of self-interest, power, and coalitional politics in the day-to-day workings of academia. Collegiality, decency, and accommodation are important norms to which we may aspire, but they are not the only factors affecting recruitment and hiring behavior. Gaining sound advice about the process, other than through informal chats with those recently completing the process, can be difficult.<sup>4</sup>

I offer here some of my own experiences in, reactions to, and perspectives on the job search process.<sup>5</sup> I do not pretend to make an exhaustive survey of the process, I address only those aspects that held surprise value for me. My remarks are restricted to the process of gaining an initial academic position. They apply neither to lateral movements from one institution to another, nor to senior hires, processes whose characteristics look to me markedly different but about which I know little.

The search for one's first permanent academic position has several basic components. One needs to develop a standard placement file, to find out about openings and whether there might be a fit between oneself and the requirements of any given position. An application must be sent to the recruiting department. That department develops a short list of applicants to be interviewed. If one makes that cut, a visit to the department for an interview is arranged. One then decides whether one is interested and the department decides whether to make an offer. Negotiations over the offer commence and ultimately one decides whether to accept the position.

### Finding an Opening

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Once you have determined to seek a permanent academic position (or "real job"), the first question to be answered is when to go on the job market. Compared

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with ten or twenty years ago, departments seem increasingly reluctant to hire individuals only in the early stages of researching and writing a dissertation. However, it is a dubious strategy to apply for positions only after filing the Ph.D.—one may not find a job during the first year on the market. A good rule of thumb is to wait until you can send along two reasonably polished chapters,<sup>6</sup> and can give a convincing date by which you expect to be finished.<sup>7</sup> Timing entry into the market in this manner provides recruiting departments with current exemplars of your writing and research and reassures them that you are *not* a perennial dissertation writer.

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Published descriptions in the *APSA Personnel Newsletter*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *ASPA Public Administration Times*, or in letters sent to department chairs are good sources for finding out what positions are open, but they depict the job accurately only when the recruiting department has agreed upon and clearly defined the position. Positions may initially be well defined, or like the Marines, merely listed as "looking for a few good men and women." The reason for the latter approach may be that the department is internally divided over what type of person should be hired (problems of paradigmatic or ideological differences, or both), or it may really be that the department is more concerned with the quality of the hire than with specifics of what the person does. The advertised description repre-

sents no more than the degree of closure the department could reach at the time the job was listed. The problem is compounded when the position is a new one for the department, especially if it is in a subfield where the department has had no position in the past.<sup>8</sup>

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Ultimately, no position is fully defined until a hire is made: the person hired becomes the definition of what the department could find and agree upon, irrespective of what the advertisement stated. Even in strong-chair departments, hiring still operates more or less by consensus or acquiescence, which means that it is inevitably subject to coalitional politics of negotiation and compromise. However, it is difficult for the aspiring Ph.D. to know a department's divisions before arriving for the interview, let alone prior to sending an application.

Even when a department has a clear notion of the position, frequently, advertised descriptions still tell very little of what the position is really all about. Understanding of the scope of subfields and the appropriate way to study those subfields vary by department. The words may be the same, but they do not necessarily enjoy the same meaning. For example, is political behavior researched predominantly from the vantage of rational choice or that of cognitive psychology? Is public policy understood in terms of optimizing decisions and management control systems, or from the perspective of satisficing and muddling through? Answers to these questions affect the type of individual in whom a department is likely to become interested.

One can only discover those answers by additional research, i.e., talking to faculty members who know the department in question, perusing faculty listings in the *APSA Guide to Graduate Study in Political Science* (or its analog, the *Guide to Undergraduate Study in Political Science*), examining the university's course catalog, skimming recent publications by faculty in the recruiting department, or calling a member of the search committee.<sup>9</sup>

### Applying for a Position and Getting an Interview

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Departments normally ask for a curriculum vita, letters of reference,<sup>10</sup> and a writing sample as the components of the formal application. They may also ask for a short statement of research goals and for teaching evaluations. For the former, it may be useful to develop a core letter that can be adapted to suit the character of the particular position for which one is applying. One can ask to see copies of letters already used by more senior colleagues to gain a notion of what such a letter might look like. Although one ought not to try to be all things to all departments, tailoring letters of application to the peculiarities of individual departments is a pretty good idea, as the written application must somehow pique the interest of the search committee sufficiently to cause them to investigate further.<sup>11</sup>

Members of one's dissertation committee can play key roles in the search process.<sup>12</sup> They can keep their ears to the ground in order to hear about positions coming open. They can garner more specifics about the sort of individual the department may be looking for than those provided in the formal advertisements (i.e., perform an intelligence function) through the informal networks in which they move. Committee members can help the candidate make the cut from the larger universe of all applicants for the position to the much smaller subset of the short list during a phone call from (or to) the search committee which helps to distinguish the candidate from others who look much the same on paper. Members of search committees often call colleagues

in other departments specifically to ask if they have any students whom they think might fit the bill.

Some departments are looking as much (or more) to fill teaching needs as they are searching for candidates with particular research interests. Candidates capable of teaching classes which maintain or improve student-faculty ratios (such as large introductory courses) while relieving senior faculty of teaching burdens are likely to prove quite attractive, other things being equal. The smaller the department, the more important becomes the ability to teach a wide range of courses. At one liberal arts college one of my friends assured the chair that he could indeed teach courses on Eastern European politics. The fact of the matter was that he had never cracked a book on the topic. He got the job, and taught the courses.

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One's application might usefully reflect teaching strengths and interests. Sample syllabuses from courses taught or projected syllabuses that illustrate how one might approach a particular course will tell the search committee a great deal about your compatibility with their requirements.<sup>13</sup> Some departments ask candidates to give a lecture in one of their undergraduate courses in addition to giving a research colloquium.

The rather narrow range of institutions I was initially prepared to consider as a potential home soon dramatically expanded. After one especially pleasant interview, I concluded that it was very difficult to predict prior to a visit, on the basis of the professional reputation of the university or department, whether I would find folks there whom I would find congenial and interesting to talk to. One may find simpatico individuals in the least likely of

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departments, and in subfields far removed from one's own immediate area of interest. At one department I found I had more to talk about with a specialist on local politics in the Soviet Union than with faculty in my own subfields. Conversely, there may be no one in a highly ranked department with whom you feel comfortable: publication records and prestige do not necessarily correlate with being a good colleague. I made it a general rule never to turn down an interview offer (nor did I ever treat any interviews as "practice" sessions that were not to be taken seriously).

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### Getting to the Interview

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Departmental policies governing payment or reimbursement for expenses incurred by the candidate vary widely. Though this may seem a mundane topic, few graduate students I know have sufficient slack in their income to permit many expenses above those necessary to get by.<sup>14</sup> A department may expect you to pay for everything (airfare, accommodations, food and drink) up front and to be reimbursed later, or may insist that some or all arrangements be made through its offices. It is a good idea to ask about the procedures at the outset so you won't be stuck with an embarrassing paucity of cash when it comes time to pay for the meals you thought were going to be taken care of by the department (as I once was). And of course universities vary greatly in the speed with which they reimburse candidates for their expenses.

Also, it's useful to ascertain if there are limits to the airfare that a department will pay to bring you out for an interview before you buy the ticket. One department insisted that I come for an interview

immediately, rather than later (which would have made possible a cheaper, advance purchase airfare). When the chair learned the price of the cheapest ticket I could find, he balked and said that given the expense they would not interview me after all. Fortunately, I had not yet purchased the ticket. Another department asked me to interview for a one-year position, but told me they had expanded their recruitment budget: I would have to pay my way there, but they might be able to take up a collection to defray part of my expense. This really happened.

### The Interview Itself

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I have often wondered if it is a structural necessity for the interview to remain such a grueling process, or if it is a sort of social atavism, some arcane reenactment of a ritual whose instrumental value has passed but which has somehow attained an intrinsic value in the meanwhile. Like the life of Hobbes' man in nature, job interviews tend to be nasty, brutish, and short. An interview may last no more than ten hours from beginning to end, or it may stretch over more than two days. Most interviews appear to run along basically the same lines: one arrives and immediately is hurled into the maelstrom.

Despite the outward and often genuine conviviality, *all* events during the interview serve as opportunities for departmental evaluations of the candidate. This includes rides to and from the airport, meals, and cocktail parties. One can easily lose sight of this basic fact. Given that one is the focus of all attention, often from faculty whose work one knows and admires, the experience is extraordinarily heady.

Delayed flights, differences in time zones, long hours of interviews, sensory overload, and constant adrenalin flow suggest that a wise course is to eschew alcohol during the visit to the department. Because of the vagaries of weather one February flight from the west coast to a mid-western department took over twenty-four hours and five airports to complete. To say that I was not in my best form upon arrival would be a slight understatement. And I recall no department that took into account the time differences

in scheduling interview activities. I sometimes arose to have breakfast at what was 4:30 A.M. my time; me for whom no hour before 8:00 A.M. really exists. The manager of one hotel came closer to an early demise than he knew when he put me in a room fronting a busy truck route after I had requested a quiet accommodation. No sleep that night.

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Interviews provide splendid opportunities to rid yourself of those extra pounds. Departments usually take candidates to restaurants which, it is felt, will suitably impress as to the culinary sophistication of the community (e.g., this is a nice place to live). Thus, in one mid-west farm state I had oysters on the half-shell. However, do not expect to eat very much, if at all. Between the butterflies which seem to fill one's stomach at such times and the barrage of questions from your hosts (who are always promising to let you just eat, but never deliver), about four bites of any entree is a typical intake. Still, ordering an elegant meal can be satisfying to your visual and olfactory senses, and in any case, it's expected. Kevin O'Brien told me that his rule of thumb was never to order anything that could melt. Good advice, I think.

Although customary wisdom among graduate students may be that good jobs are hard to land, it's good to remember that you are also interviewing the department while they are interviewing you. It is not sensible to go on a visit thinking that the power of decision is entirely asymmetrical. Most job candidates eventually do find jobs in academia, although this varies by graduate program, by subfield, and over time. It can be a genuinely liberating experience to decline an offer from an institution that doesn't seem right, even in the absence of any alternatives. Also a lit-

tle scary. My advisors suggested that in addition to a coat and tie I take along a proper frame of mind. This meant to go in thinking of myself as a colleague of those in the recruiting department, a junior colleague to be sure, but still not merely as a graduate student or supplicant. It seemed good advice then; it still does. One has to make the move from the forecandle to the bridge sooner or later.

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### Meeting with Potential Colleagues Individually

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Depending on the department's size, one will meet potential colleagues during a veritable flurry of 15-30 minute appointments, usually scheduled back to back, with each current host taking you to the next on the list, sometimes for two to three hours at a clip. This is simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting. Usually one will also meet at least some faculty in small groups. Unless your memory is better than mine, you will no doubt mix up faces and names.

If time permits, doing a little research on the people you are going to meet during your visit will only help. Most departments have available some sort of printed biography of their faculty which includes bibliographical references. They can always send one along before your visit. One of my graduate colleagues made sure to read at least one piece written by each of the individuals he would meet during the course of his interview, reasoning he could know better how to talk with them. That may seem an extreme measure, but preparation approximating that approach gives you a better idea about who your potential colleagues are and will enable you to ask more intelligent questions on your visit. It may also help you keep your feet out of your mouth.<sup>15</sup>

Interviewers frequently expect you to provide gossip about the department you hail from. These are treacherous waters that must be navigated carefully. How does one respond to such questions without appearing to be rude and simultaneously say nothing of any substance? No easy answer here, but assuming always that nothing you say will be held in confidence and that you will meet your inter-



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viewers again in the future (as most assuredly you will), it is better to err on the side of demurral than of volubility.<sup>16</sup>

Each person with whom you speak will want to know enough about you and your work to answer several questions. How does that work fit with what that person does, in terms of subject and paradigm? How would you approach teaching courses currently taught by that faculty member? Such courses may lie well outside your main strengths. Showing interest, if not knowledge, is a good response, but may lead you into discussions of subjects that are over your head. One of my colleagues solved this problem by treading carefully and letting a few intelligent questions take the place of intelligent answers. The interviewer was more than happy to discuss his work and answer my colleague's questions. The intellectual agenda (how rich, how interesting to you) of a future colleague is valuable information in any case. Some faculty will ask about what professional books you have read recently, others about the professional journals you peruse regularly. For most it is a simple matter of discovering your interests, for others it provides a litmus test of your acceptability and correctness.

What does the candidate think of others whose work the interviewer admires? Will the interviewer and the candidate have something to say to each other? Does the interviewer find the candidate personally congenial? After all, you might be in the office next door for a few decades. How would hiring a particular candidate affect the distribution of power among different coalitions in the department both immediately and in the long term? How would that affect the interests of the individual with whom you are now talking?

As with any meeting of strangers, those on the other side of the fence will be searching to find common ground with you. They will largely give you the benefit of the doubt. They want you to succeed, to make a favorable impression, especially those faculty whose decision it was to bring you out for an interview.<sup>17</sup> At the same time they maintain a certain wariness and reserve. It is easy to conclude that the interview is going better than it really is. Those who like you will be forthcoming in

their praise, while those who are less favorably disposed are apt to remain silent, at least in your presence.

Depending on one's specialty, one will also likely meet with potential colleagues from outside the department whose research interests may coincide with your own. This gives you the opportunity to discover the contours of the community of scholars in which you might wish to work, and affords the department the chance for additional evaluations of the candidates. Sometimes these folks will, on their own initiative, offer candid evaluations of the department.

In an analogous fashion, one usually meets, often as a group, graduate (or undergraduate) students from the department. They will want to know your teaching philosophy and whether you are likely to offer courses in which they would be interested. They may also offer frank appraisals of the faculty and the graduate program. And, in many departments, although graduate students have no formal vote on job candidates, their evaluations are treated seriously by the responsible faculty.<sup>18</sup>

Having met with faculty and students individually, having been wined and dined, comes the most crucial component of any academic job interview: the formal presentation of one's research to the assembled faculty of the department. It is to that topic I turn in the concluding half of this essay, along with a consideration of what to expect if you receive a job offer and how to react if no such offer is forthcoming.

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### About the Author

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### Notes

1. I am indebted to Nelson Polsby and Kevin O'Brien, whose comments on an earlier draft added significantly to this essay.

2. See Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, translated by Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

3. For example, looking through back issues of *PS* I was able to find only one excellent, if brief, essay on finding a job. See Robert Axelrod, "Tips for an Academic Job Talk," *PS* 18 (1985): 613.

4. I was extraordinarily fortunate to be in a graduate program which had not only a faculty member designated as placement officer (it was then alternately Nelson Polsby and Robert Kagan), but also a full-time placement coordinator, Lynn Gordon, who was more than simply a clearinghouse for paperwork. She provided both excellent advice and warm encouragement to the job candidates (and still does).

5. While my experiences may not be typical of those of every candidate, neither are they particularly unusual. They have at least the virtues of having been lengthy and recent. I sent out more than three dozen applications between Fall 1982 and Fall 1985. Ultimately, I interviewed with nine political science departments at institutions ranging from liberal arts colleges to state schools dominated by agriculture and engineering to large research universities. In the interim I taught in several temporary positions.

6. Against my advisor's judgment I sent off several first drafts of chapters with one application. On re-reading them a few months later it became immediately clear, if for no other reason, why I was not asked to interview at that department.

7. As opposed to one of those "completion" dates which seem to recede ever further into the future.

8. I once had a series of conversations with the chair of a department where I taught for a while about how to define a new position the department was planning to advertise. The chair was searching through other advertisements for the right words and couldn't come to closure because he just wasn't sure what it was he wanted.

9. This stage of the process is considerably compressed at the annual meeting of the APSA if one registers for the Personnel Service. This forum provides a valuable nexus between recruiting departments and job seekers. Its

primary limitation is that it occurs very early in the annual interviewing season and many departments will not be represented.

10. It almost goes without saying that one's placement file should have letters of reference sufficiently current to reflect progress on the dissertation and recent research and teaching experience. This may require gentle but persistent requests of one's references to update the letters.

11. When you consider that a department might receive several hundred applications for one position, the problem of standing out from the crowd becomes clear.

12. For a more general discussion of their roles, see my "Reflections on the Dissertation Committee," *PS* (Spring 1987): 257-61.

13. I was asked in one informal interview if I could teach a course on public personnel management. My candid answer that I had never thought about it apparently was not satisfactory. Later I spent a few weeks putting together a course on that topic in case I should ever be asked about it in the future. The issue never came up again. I guess it's kind of like keeping the tigers away.

14. Nelson Polsby puts it more simply: "Graduate students are always hungry." (Polsby's Second Law).

15. Given the extremely small world of professional political science, the adage, "if you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all," is a good one to live by during interviews. One friend of mine, when queried about the work of a particular scholar, found himself launching into a detailed and scathing critique of its many deficiencies only to learn that that scholar had been the mentor of the person who asked the question.

16. One of my colleagues suggests that in interviews one is best advised to talk intellectual substance: the books and articles in the making in his home department.

17. Sometimes faculty have to expend considerable political capital to get a particular candidate in for an interview.

18. One usually meets one additional person: the dean of the college in which the department resides. While this meeting is largely perfunctory, one can learn about faculty benefits or ancient Egyptian irrigation methods, as I once did.